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Defense: experience, depth return

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big sky + state

DEFENSE: EXPERIENCE, DEPTH RETURN

Defensive coordinator Pokey Allen is walking around with an optimistic air about him this season at the University of Montana. The reason? The reason is eight returning starters, and several other players who saw a lot of action in the '78 campaign.

"This could be one of our best defensive teams ever," Allen said. Head Coach Gene Carlson agrees, saying, "Defense will be our strength this year."

The secondary returns five seniors, all of whom have started at one time for UM. All-conference free safety Greg Dunn and cornerback Scot Ferda, also an All-Big Sky pick last year, are solid. Cornerback Ed Cerkovnik and strong safety Jay Becker are both two-time lettermen. Randy Laird, only a sophomore, played a lot this season. Kelly Johnson could play almost anywhere in the defensive backfield, unless he is at fullback.

The defensive front is led by first time all-conference choice Sam Martin at right end, hard-hitting Arnie Rigoni at right tackle, Bret Barrick at left tackle and sophomore letterman Pat Curry, a star of the future, at left end. There are several top-notch backups, giving Montana exceptional depth. This group (minus graduate Steve Fisher) is the primary reason the Grizzlies led the conference in rush defense last year.

(over)

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All-American candidate Kent Clausen, the team's leading tackler a year ago, (102) anchors the defense at middle linebacker. He was an all-conference pick. He can pass cover extremely well for his size (6-5, 235), and picked off four passes last year, returning one for a TD. His backup, Rolly Starkey, a freshman redshirt, could follow in his footsteps.

On the outside at linebacker are Jim Hogan and Barry Sacks, both seniors and two-time lettermen who have started in the past.

"The linebacking crew should be more than adequate," Carlson said. "The defensive front has more depth than any group on the team, although our secondary is also a quality group."

Carlson and Allen said they plan to continue with the 4-3 and "blitz package" which was very effective last season. "The defense will obviously be tailored to overcome weaknesses that appeared in 1978," Carlson said.

Lettermen Marty Andrews, Dave Paoli, Ron Sharkey and Mike Carroll are four defensive linemen who will be hard to keep out of the lineup. There are also a couple of freshmen who could see playing time here.

Junior Terry Thomas took over the punting chores for Allen Green midway through last season and finished with a 38.6 yard average in 29 attempts. He kicked a pair of 57-yarders in one game. Green finished ranked in the top five nationally, and QB Bart Andrus was an outstanding prep punter, and could be used here. Green averaged almost 40 yards (39.8) on 43 punts.

With 17 returning starters and 41 lettermen back, UM's 4-2 conference finish in '78 -- its best in eight seasons -- could be a sign of things to come.

Nineteen-seventy-nine could be The Year of the Grizzlies.